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Mieke Verloo

Reflections on the Dutch case on Gender Mainstreaming

As Gender Mainstreaming is still a quite recent strategy, only a limited number of countries have a somewhat longer experience. Although countries like Germany seem to have developed fast in this respect since the turn of the century, the most elaborated examples of Gender Mainstreaming as a strategy are still found in Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. Sweden has developed the strategy at the national, regional and local levels. In a very short time – they started only in 1994 – pilot projects have been set up, procedures put in place, and many new and innovative instruments – the most well known being the 3R method – have been constructed. Norway, as one of the first countries to adopt the goal of Gender Mainstreaming, did not concentrate on the development of instruments, but claims to have integrated gender equality in its consensus oriented style of policy making. The experiences in the Netherlands are more limited, but started already in the 1980s, and they also involve the construction of innovative instruments and infrastructures. How can we assess the progress made on Gender Mainstreaming in the Netherlands? Let us first take a closer look at Gender Mainstreaming: what does it mean?

Gender Mainstreaming

There are several definitions of Gender Mainstreaming. The definition of the Group of specialists on Gender Mainstreaming at the Council of Europe has been widely adopted because it accentuates gender equality as an objective, and not women as a target group, and because it emphasizes that Gender Mainstreaming is a strategy. This definition says that: "Gender Mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making. (Council of Europe 1998: 15)".

The essential element in this definition of the strategy of Gender Mainstreaming is its accent on what needs to be changed, targeting policy processes as the main change object. Gender Mainstreaming, according to this definition is about (re)organising procedures and routines, about (re)organising responsibilities and capacities for the incorporation of a gender equality perspective. In further elaborations of the strategy, different tactics that are distinguished can concentrate on organising the use of gender expertise in policy-making, or on organising the use of gender impact analyses in this process, or on organising consultation and participation of relevant groups and organisations in the process. Additionally, the accent in Gender Mainstreaming is on gender, not only – more narrowly – on "women" as a target group.

The underlying assumption is that most regular policies are gendered, that regular policies are a major constitutional element in the construction of gendered social institutions, and that gendered social institutions are an important component in the continuous reconstruction of gender inequality. Gender Mainstreaming usually involves a reorganisation of policy processes, because existing procedures and routines are all too often gender-blind or gender-biased. In contrast to the standard assumption of policy makers and policy-making organisations that their work is gender-neutral, it has been proven over and over again that gender differentials are not recognised in regular policies, and that unreflected assumptions include (most often unintentional) biases in favour of the existing unequal gender relations (Verloo & Roggeband 1996; Siim 1988).

Gender Mainstreaming as a strategy is meant to actively counteract this gender bias, and to use the normal mandate of policy makers to promote more equitable relations between women and men (Verloo 2000: 13). It addresses "systems and structures themselves – those very institutionalised practices that cause both individual and group disadvantage in the first place" (Rees 2000: 3). Because of this focus on a systems approach, "it has much more potential to have a serious impact upon gender equality than other strategies have" (Rees 2000).

Currently, all attention seems to be focused on clarification of the strategy, development of tools and methods, and pilot projects on implementation. There is little to no attention to the various definitions of gender equality that are hiding under the cover of this strategy. Therefore, this paper will not only present a concise description of Gender Mainstreaming in the Netherlands, but will also concentrate on the interaction between process and content, between strategy and objective.

To this extent, the paper will use the Dutch manual on Gender Mainstreaming (Emancipatie in beleid: Handleiding Mainstreaming) as its analytic case, and refer to an inventory of Dutch best practises Gender Mainstreaming made in 2000 (commissioned by the government). Before turning to this case study, an overview of the literature on Gender Mainstreaming should enable us to address the question more generally.

State of the art in research in Gender Mainstreaming

Gender Mainstreaming is a recent strategy, and the few studies that exist at the moment stress that it is too early for evaluation. Still, there are some studies available, and this paragraph will review them to assess the state of the art knowledge in this field. The study of Rees (1998) was among the first, and her path breaking work on Gender Mainstreaming in education, training and labour market policies is a major reference. She argues that Gender Mainstreaming is potentially promising, yet poorly conceptualised and inadequately understood, and that there is a need to address the fundamental nature of gender contracts, and the underlying ideology of the white nuclear family that underpins so many of our social institutions.

The other work mostly mentioned by all scholars of Gender Mainstreaming is the Final report of the group of Specialists on Gender Mainstreaming of the Council of Europe (1998). Its definition of Gender Mainstreaming as: the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making has been diffused widely. This last report is mainly a systematic exploration of the strategy, combined with examples of good practices. This type of report has its limitations. Reports putting the accent on collection of good practices mostly suffer from a clear presentation of criteria to decide what is a good practice and why. Moreover, as most of these studies try to advocate a wider dissemination of the Gender Mainstreaming strategy, there seems to be an overdose of enthusiasm, and a lack of criticism.

Reviewing these studies, it is striking that many of them share the character of the Council of Europe report. They propose ideas for the design and implementation of the strategy, and collect good practices (Recipes, Athens report Council of Europe, McKay & Bilton 2000). There is only a limited number of more reflective studies, and very little academic research. This section will review the most promising ones, to be able to distinguish what still needs to be done. Although there are but a few reviews available at this moment, mostly fragmented, it is striking that their conclusions seem to point in similar directions.

Employment and labour issues

First of all, there is a major accent on Gender Mainstreaming in connection to employment or labour market issues. Behning & Serrano Pascual (2001a & 2001b) concentrate on the impact of the concept of Gender Mainstreaming in national practices on employment, covering twelve Western European countries. They find differences in Gender Mainstreaming parallel to divergent national paths pursued towards the goal of gender equality. As shown by the national reports in their book, the understanding and adaptation of the Gender Mainstreaming concept varies widely in the Member States of the EU, ranging from the equation of the concept with equal opportunities and equality to its being understood as affirmative action, equal treatment, equal participation, reform of government. As a result, they state that there is not a general understanding of the concept in the various Member States, and – even more importantly – most policies implemented in Member States are just a continuation of previous policies. The main problem is a focus on women as the subject of change, and a focus on fitting women into the status quo rather than transform the status quo. In Spain for instance, Gender Mainstreaming is the reinforcing of positive discrimination policies. Behning and Serrano Pascual explain these differences in the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming as connected to national differences in predominant gender contracts, placing the Netherlands and Austria in a model labelled "male breadwinner – female part-time employed and homemaker", and Greece and Spain in a transition model from a traditional towards a dual earner model.

Behning and Serrano Pascual stress the importance of a clear understanding of Gender Mainstreaming because an adequate implementation requires a gender perspective in all decision-making processes. They note that their research indicates that some of the emancipation concepts developed by the women's movements in the Member States may be incompatible with the general principle underlying Gender Mainstreaming, because it is focused on gender and on both sexes, whereas (parts of the) women's movements insist on specific features of women's identities, and on a sameness approach to gender equality.

As they analyse Gender Mainstreaming in the EU as a top-down strategy – which implies an attempt at harmonisation of European gender cultures – they regret the failure of institutional actors to include actors from the women's movements in the development of the strategy. They plea for a stronger participation of citizens and women's movements in order not to lose a great deal of knowledge and implementation opportunities. They conclude that it is particularly important to clarify the meaning of Gender Mainstreaming.

Gender Mainstreaming tools

Another review work focuses on specific Gender Mainstreaming tools. The EU's expert group on Gender and Employment EGGE recently published a report on Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) and the European Employment strategy (Rubery & Fagan 2000). GIA is one of the most developed instruments for Gender Mainstreaming (Partner 2 1996). A GIA identifies positive or negative outcomes of proposed policies in terms of gender equality. GIAs are meant to inform decision-making in an early stage so as to be able to reorient or mitigate policies if necessary. As an instrument, GIA is developing at uneven rates across Member States, the group concludes, with Sweden and the Netherlands taking the lead. The report stresses that not only more practical elaborations of the GIA methodology are necessary, but most urgently a further conceptual elaboration. What the report calls an "upwards" elaboration, means that the guidelines need to be located in a broader and more explicit theoretical statement of how gender inequality is reproduced in society, and a classification about the concept of equality is to be adapted. The "downwards", more practical elaboration then follows from this conceptual framing of gender relations and gender inequality. According to the report, a more developed

conceptual framework can inform GIA, and lead to improved GIA methodology, to avoid GIAs that merely make gender visible, but fail to be gender sensitive. This is all the more important because they find there is a lack of expertise in policy evaluation in general, and of methods for Gender Mainstreaming evaluation specifically.

Another major issue that is brought to the fore by the report is how to combine GIA with attention for other forms of structural inequality. They point out that this question will gain increasing prominence because the new European Social Policy Agenda sets out a number of proposed actions on discrimination on other grounds than gender. This calls for a sound understanding of dimensions of gender inequality as related to other structural inequalities, such as ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation and physical ability.

Comparative TSER study

The TSER project on "Predicting the Impact of Policy" starts pointing out that "understandings about the core meanings attached to the concept of equality and the ways it is best pursued are affected by historic and contemporary national influences that are regularly revised and renewed". According to the researchers, diversity in concepts of equality is inevitable, and has positive as well as negative consequences. Because of this diversity, strategies also need to be democratic. In a pluralist understanding this can be seen as a facet of subsidiarity, which in turn is an element of democracy. They find not only different rates of progress towards gender equality in the states concerned, but also different legal and non-legal strategies to fight inequalities and different notions of equality, different distributions of the burdens and benefits of gender equality policies. They conclude that even if formal compliance with the letter of the law cannot be equated with convergence between EU and Member States' policies, effectiveness of EU equality norms depends very much on the fit between them and the national policy environment into which they have to be imported (Nott, Beveridge & Stephen 2000). In that sense, they stress the dependency of the EU on Member States for the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming.

Gender Mainstreaming and policy adaptation in the EU

The first academic studies centre on explaining conditions for a successful start of Gender Mainstreaming (Mazey 2000; Hafner-Burton & Pollack 2000). Mazey shows how Gender Mainstreaming constitutes a clear example of policy succession or policy adaptation, prompted by the desire to overcome the limitations of existing policies, and the need to respond to a changed policy environment. In Hafner-Burton's and Pollack's analysis of Gender Mainstreaming in the European Union, it is pointed out that the EU until recently has pursued its ambitious agenda on gender equality mainly along the comparatively narrow neo-liberal front of workplace legislation, but that it has begun to pursue a broader agenda in the 90s, with potentially important consequences for European women and for the EU as a progressive policy. Their work concentrates on explaining this expansion of the EU agenda, and on explaining cross sectional variation within the EU in the start and implementation of Gender Mainstreaming. They consider five areas: Structural funds, Employment and Social Affairs, Development, Competition, and Science, Research and Development.

Even if they offer a rather sweeping analysis of the policy frames involved, and framing processes related to them, their analysis shows the dominance of framing as an important aspect of explaining the occurrence and successful starting of the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming. They use the concept of strategical framing as a dynamic concept that enables to see how different actors adapt existing policy frames to pursue their respective goals. Their case studies support two general conclusions: the

variability of results, and secondly, the ability of strategic actors to overcome structural obstacles through a skilful process of strategic framing.

In their final conclusions, they warn the EU that their Gender Mainstreaming efforts might turn into an integrationist approach – integrating women and gender issues into specific policies rather than rethinking the fundamental aims of the EU from a gender perspective. They see this as the inevitable result of the strategic framing processes which "sell" Gender Mainstreaming as an effective means to the ends pursued by the policy makers, rather than as an overt challenge to those ends. Especially since the EU is one of the most successful implementers so far, this threatens the transformative potential of Gender Mainstreaming.

The study of Braithwaite (1999) concerns Gender Mainstreaming in the Structural Funds exclusively. Her study on what can be seen as the most developed area within the EU so far, comes to similar conclusions as the research discussed earlier. It states that many important areas of Structural Funds intervention in terms of gender equality are missed, and that the relevance of gender is sometimes highly contested. It stresses that one of the general risks of the Gender Mainstreaming approach is that, in the absence of precise objectives on reduced gender inequalities, the treatment of gender can be easily located within, and then be subject to, other policy goals, such as employment creation, economic growth or poverty reduction. So far, it says, the main objective in terms of the Structural Funds and gender equality is to improve female participation in the labour market. Reconciliation of home and professional life is then treated as a means to facilitate women's more active participation in the labour market, rather than as an equality objective in its own right. Contrary to the rhetoric of Gender Mainstreaming, efficiency and effectiveness are, in practice, more convincing arguments for integrating equality concerns into Structural Funds programmes than "equity".

Gender Mainstreaming across Europe

An evaluative report made for the Council of Europe (Verloo 1999a) concludes also that there is a lack of elaboration of gender equality as a definite objective, and a need for ongoing dialogues on what gender equality should be. It concludes that the main accent in Gender Mainstreaming so far has been on analytical and educational tools, (except at the local and regional level), and that consultation and participation of citizens or users is less used, which threatens to turn Gender Mainstreaming into a technocratic enterprise. The report is one of the few to pay attention to Central and Eastern Europe, pointing out that only Slovenia has started implementation of Gender Mainstreaming, and that on the whole the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming in the candidate states encounters a multitude of barriers, including problems to get gender equality on the political agenda.

The only other study on Gender Mainstreaming in connection to Central and Eastern Europe is Bretherton (2001). She concludes that despite a commitment by the EU to integrate gender equality in all its activities, mainstreaming has been notably absent from policies towards Central and Eastern European countries. Emphasising the Polish case, she states that enlargement policy is illustrative of a conflict between ideas and interests which serves to inhibit institutionalisation of mainstreaming principles and practices, not only in relation to the Enlargement, but across EU policy areas and beyond. She concludes that the EU has failed in mainstreaming gender in policy areas related to the Enlargement so far, and that the failure to mainstream gender in Agenda 2000 generates strong fears that enlargement will entail a general weakening of EU equality policy (CEC 1997; EP 1997, 1998; CEC1999). With regard to civil society, her study shows that, while there has been a fall in women's representation in Central and Eastern European countries, there has been a significant development of transnational networking by Central and Eastern European women's groups. These groups have been targeting mostly the UN system for lobbying about gender issues, but they are

increasingly focusing on EU officials to influence Central and Eastern European governments towards gender equality goals.

The Dutch Case on Gender Mainstreaming

The strategy of Gender Mainstreaming is certainly not new in the Netherlands. In fact, it can be seen as a further elaboration of the strategy of 'facet policy' developed since the 1970s as one of the two strategies that were jointly embraced. Facet policy stated that equality was to be seen as a facet of all policies. Facet policy however, proved to be hard to realize, as the infrastructure at first was limited to a Secretary of State (1977) and a unit (DCE) for the Co-ordination of what is called "emancipation" policies. Until the 90s there were gender equality initiatives at several ministries, but they were mostly limited to targeted activities. The ICE, a group of focal points for gender equality from all ministries was established in 1977 too, but its influence dwindled down quickly as the officials appointed were hardly ever highly positioned within their own ministry, and moreover, tended to be replaced often.

A crucial move in the 80s was to define gender inequality as a problem of power differences between women and men. The attention of policy makers consequently widened from "culture" and consciousness raising to changing structures in society. Even if in later years the official definition of the gender problematic as a problem of power differences was never explicitly changed, Dutch gender equality policies in practice were more and more narrowed down to labour policy. In line with the main objectives of the Dutch governments at the time, the main issue seemed to be increasing the participation of women on the labour market. Although this focus has resulted in a number of policy changes that were warmly welcomed by feminists, such as an increase in child care centres and a policy offering more opportunities for part time work for everyone, the sad consequence was also that facet policy shrunk down to almost nothing. Towards the end of the 80s attempts to integrate gender equality in the regular ministries had faltered, and only a list of three action points per ministry remained. These action points consisted mainly of specific targeted measures that had an adhoc character, and were not part of a long-term strategy (TECENA 2000).

The initiative to develop a gender impact assessment can be seen as a renewed attempt at materialising facet policy. In the beginning of the 1990s, the Dutch were not only one of the few countries to develop a special instrument for Gender Mainstreaming at the national level (a Gender Impact Assessment called EER) but, what is more important, they were the only one to actually use the instrument. The recent study that evaluated the first seven EERs showed that the instrument as such is a good instrument (van der Graaf, Mossink & Gröflin, 1999). The political will to continue to use the instrument is present.

A major problem with the instrument, however, is its position in the decision making process, as there is to this day no systematic procedure to guarantee its use. Policy making varies considerably within the Dutch government, across fields and issues. The departmental autonomy of officials is matched by the autonomy of ministers in the Cabinet. The Dutch civil service is said to be relatively fragmented. In this "kingdom of the disunited ministries" there is unfortunately still no procedure where salience, relevance and importance for gender relations are the criteria for a compulsory use of this EER, or for any other mainstreaming strategy. One would prefer to see that a minister, and hence the Council of Ministers, decides about this, informed by expert advice (from inside or outside the bureaucracy). A second problem is that the EER so far has been used at a rather late stage in the policy making process, and consequently, that influence on the policies involved has been the exception rather than the rule. The evaluation report recognises these problems, and gives recommendations to solve them. As yet, it is too early to see if the recommendations will change the practice. The EER is

still more a promise for the incorporation of a gender perspective in policies than a reality.

The different histories of two instruments developed in the Netherlands – the EER and the Gender Bias Research Guidelines – demonstrate clearly that mainstreaming involves more than making an instrument. While the Dutch Equality Unit promoted the first extensively, and several local women's policy agencies and some NGOs lobbied for it, the second was neither promoted nor supported and ended up in a desk drawer. The lesson to learn from this is that it is not enough to have instruments available, and that the organisation of responsibilities for the use of the instrument is crucial. Certainly in the beginning, promotion activities, such as workshops, articles in departments' newsletters and so on, appear to be necessary to 'seduce' civil servants who are new to questions of gender equality to use the instrument. The experiences from the Netherlands also show the importance of organising and supporting Gender Mainstreaming at the top level. Not only the commitment from the leaders is necessary, but also a clear commitment in the policy formulation. In the Netherlands this commitment is founded on the basis of the former facet policy.

Concerning gender equality infrastructure, at the national level these days, there is still both a unit (DCE, located within the Ministry of Social Affairs, and Employment) and a network of focal points in all ministries (ICE). Within most ministries, there are internal committees on gender equality too. After a decade of continuous reorganisation and turbulence within DCE, which caused a loss of professionalism and influence over other ministries, and even an attempt at abolishing DCE in the early 90s (on the grounds of mainstreaming!) the DCE seems to be right on track again at the beginning of the new century (Outshoorn & Swiebel 1998).

Zooming in on Dutch Gender Mainstreaming

Turning to the inventory of Dutch best practises on Gender Mainstreaming, two elements are striking. First of all, there is no mentioning whatsoever of the objective of this strategy. The inventory is based on the answers to a questionnaire. The questionnaire starts with the question: Can you describe the mainstreaming activities that you have been involved with? Continuing with: what was the objective of this initiative? The report gives no information on what could possibly count as The Gender equality objective, and does not analyse the answers given to the second question. Answers given to the second question are mostly of the type: we want to brainstorm on Gender Mainstreaming, or we want to disseminate information. Referring to the objective as related to gender equality is rare. Secondly, the inventory does not seem to have clear criteria on what counts as Gender Mainstreaming, but uncritically accepts the presentation of activities as such. As a result, activities such as a special fund for women, a plan to stimulate more women in decision making positions in the field of sport, a database on feminist documentation centres, research on women in top positions are all mentioned as Gender Mainstreaming activities, even if they are clear examples of targeted gender equality policies. They are mentioned along with Gender Mainstreaming instruments such as GIA's, and many conferences and explorative studies. We can conclude safely that this inventory is a missed opportunity of clarifying both the concept and the practises of Gender Mainstreaming.

The letter of the State Secretary for Emancipation that accompanies the advisory report "Gender Mainstreaming, a strategy to improve quality", has more to offer on this: an independent assessment committee is suggested, that will report regularly on the results of departmental Gender Mainstreaming efforts. In this paper I focus on the relation between strategy and objective, and just the fact that such a committee will be installed is not enough to assess the value of such a committee. We would need to know more about its assignment, we would need to know if this Committee is supposed to evaluate

mainly the strategy or also the objective and the interaction between strategy and objective as well.

When we turn to the manual, we can hardly escape being critical once more. To start with a slightly more positive tone, the manual rightly describes Gender Mainstreaming as a strategy. It also mentions that it is a continuous, process-oriented strategy, that it is never finished. It does not, however, point out that this means that the organisation (or the anchoring) of the incorporation of a gender perspective is essential, and accordingly, gives no ideas how to do this.

The two criticisms that I will concentrate on concern the lack of attention to the objective of the Gender Mainstreaming strategy and the way this manual refers to the necessity of strategical framing. The manual does not explain that Gender Mainstreaming is a strategy towards gender equality. In its intro, it even plays down on this crucial element, by explaining in general terms that mainstreaming is a strategy to incorporate a specific aspect in regular policies. It then goes on to mention emancipation as an "example" of such a specific aspect! The only further reference to a goal is one section later (on p.70), where two questions are mentioned that are crucial in Gender Mainstreaming: how are aspects of gender connected to policy problems and chosen solutions, and what is the result of policies for different groups, such as women and men? (Note again the playing down on gender in the wording of "such as".) It comes as no surprise then, that there is no explanation what the goal of Gender Mainstreaming should be, no mentioning what gender equality, or emancipation as a goal should be. This is striking because Gender Mainstreaming as a strategy is meant to involve "regular" actors, who cannot be expected to have knowledge about this.

How does the manual refer to "content" at all? The manual refers to content using the concept of problem definitions. Under a heading on "Commitment and support" (draagvlak), an explanation starts on how a shared problem definition, a shared analysis, a clear policy framework is essential to create commitment and support (p.9). Further in the manual, this is explained in more detail (p.18). The manual explains that problem definitions are crucial in enhancing the possibilities for problems to reach the agenda. It gives an example where "emancipation" (not really a problem, but a goal, but this is a side remark), was a concept that generated too much resistance, similar to words like "gender", and "women". Chosen concepts matter, the text goes on, and therefore often concepts like "diversity", or "equality", or "participation in society" are chosen rather than gender or women or emancipation. This section on problem definition is closed by a sentence that explains that "linking with existing mission statements, goals or concepts of organisations is a good strategy to get the aspect emancipation on the agenda".

After this close reading of the text, we can conclude that the manual does not clarify what the goal of gender equality is or should be, and that it calls for an "anything goes, as long as it sells" approach. It will remain to be seen if this leads to a proliferation of interesting conceptualisations of the goal, or whether it will mainly make Gender Mainstreaming an empty strategy, a strategy that can be used for any goal, as long as some connection to emancipation can be claimed or suggested. I am afraid that the last possibility is the only realistic one, especially since the recent Dutch cabinet headed by Balkenende seemed to re-introduce a liberal perspective to gender equality, playing down on structural analysis in favour of assuming an uncomplicated possibility of free choice and a neutral state. What would be needed is a manual that explains not only policy processes, but a clear vision on gender equality as a goal, imbedded in an analysis of social, economic and cultural power dynamics resulting in gender inequality, and in an overall Gender Mainstreaming policy.

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